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ABSTRACT

In 1984 the Louisiana State Superintendent of Education directed the Bureau of Evaluation to conduct a study of alternative testing strategies for the State, keeping in mind the possibility that retaining the current testing program was an alternative to be considered. The Bureau designed a study calling for the involvement of four distinct groups: (1) the general public; (2) parents of children affected by the State testing program; (3) local education agency (LEA) teaching and central office staff; and (4) Staff Program administrators or policymakers. Participants were selected by local superintendents for skills as opinion-leaders, and by State Department of Education administrators at the state level. Group interviews and individual interviews provided data. Groups were almost unanimous in identifying major purposes for a state testing program: (1) parents wanted information about how their children were doing on skills beyond the minimums; (2) LEA staff felt this should not be a requirement for a promotion; and (3) both groups were happy in suggesting a strategy that would give normative data on higher level skills, but that would not count them as a promotion requirement. Pre-interview training proved to be successful. This study procedure was extremely labor-intensive, and suggestions from interviews had to be carefully weighed by technical staff. (LMO)

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BROAD-BASED INVOLVEMENT IN A STUDY OF ALTERNATIVE TESTING STRATEGIES FOR LOUISIANA

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Situation

Louisiana, within the last decade, has established a competency based education package that includes State legislation, State Board of Education policy, and accompanying State Department of Education programs, and that has minimum competency testing as a focal point. The package is extremely comprehensive. Its major components include:

1) State minimum standards in all subject areas for all grades.
2) State Curriculum Guides providing suggestions about how to teach these standards.
3) Pupil Progression Plans detailing the student promotion policies of each local education agency (LEA); LEAs are required to prepare these annually for approval by the State Board of Education and must specify how student performance on the State Basic Skills Test is used as the principal criterion for promotion.
4) State Testing that includes an assessment program, with no impact on student promotion, which is phased out as the State Basic Skills Test (BST) is introduced. The BST began with second grade students in 1982, and was planned to add a grade each year until all public school students, grades two through twelve, who are addressing the state minimum standards are tested annually in 1992.
5) State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Program providing remedial instruction to all students failing to meet the BST score established by the State Board of Education. In 1984-85 approximately 15,000 students participated in this program.

In March 1984 the newly-elected State Superintendent of Education directed the SDE Bureau of Evaluation to conduct a study of alternative testing strategies for the State. His major reason for reconsidering State testing was the position, stated firmly in his campaign, that testing and promoting the "basics" were not enough -- under his administration the emphasis would be on excellence. Other factors that appeared to support a general reconsideration of the testing program were the national and State interest in educational quality, the adoption of considerably more stringent high school graduation requirements by the State Board, the fact that the entire testing program would not be in place for another eight years, and the rising cost of the total package of programs. Also, all of the parts of the competency based education program had not been in operation until the compensatory/remedial segment was begun in 1982. The past year was the first opportunity to see how the different components actually worked together.

The State Superintendent agreed that retaining the testing program as it was currently structured was one of the "alternatives" that could be considered. He specified that parents, teachers, and LEA staff be included in the study and gave every indication that he would use the study results in his final decision.

Developing the Study Design

The Bureau of Evaluation has experience with the programs related to State testing, and has in fact evaluated the compensatory education program since its inception. The Bureau is also responsible for conducting policy advisement studies in the area of State testing for

special education students. This assignment was somewhat out of the ordinary because it was completely open ended: the Superintendent simply wanted suggestions from a wide range of audiences about the directions the State testing program should take. In developing the study design the Bureau made some assumptions about contextual conditions that would affect it:

1) The SDE administration was new, and had not yet established informal communication lines with the State Board and the LEAs. As a result, the process used in the study was expected to be more important than the actual information collected, and to set the stage for future SDE-public working relationships.
2) The topic of State testing would be confounded with other related programs in the minds of the study participants. Parents and LEA staff members would have difficulty in separating their judgments about State testing from their experiences with Pupil Progression Plan promotion requirements, compensatory education, and the like. Thus, these topics would also be addressed in the study.
3) The evaluators expected to find conflicting goals among groups. Teachers, it was thought, would be sensitive to the teacher accountability aspect of State testing, while State Board members were expected to demand more stringent tests to monitor implementation of their new graduation requirements.
4) Study participants would require inservice training. Parents and teachers in particular were expected to have limited familiarity with all of the programs related to current State testing.

After considering these assumptions, the Bureau decided to design a study that was iterative (involving successive waves of people, each of which was informed of previous discussion) in group and individual interviews. The study was also designed to have no clear ending, but rather to continue as a policy advisement function until the new State testing program had been decided upon.

Study Design

The study design called for the involvement of four distinct groups: the general public; parents of children affected by the State testing program; LEA teaching and central office staff; and State program administrators or policy makers. At this time all groups except the general public have been included. Statewide public forums are scheduled beginning late October 1984 to enfold that group.

Since group interviews could not be large enough to give a statistically representative sample of the State that type of sample was not attempted. Instead, the participants were selected to (a) provide opinion-leaders and (b) make the public education community aware of the study. Teachers and central office staff members were solicited from a systematic sample of school districts by calling the local superintendent of schools, explaining the purpose of the study, and asking him or her to nominate either a central office staff person familiar with the testing program or a teacher of a grade level affected by the test. Parents were selected similarly; in each sampled LEA the superintendent was asked to choose two parents, with the request that one parent represent minority or disadvantaged students. At the State level the evaluators held individual interviews with SDE administrators

involved in the State testing program, members of the State Board of Education who were suggested by the Board president, and others felt to be particular stakeholders, such as the Governor's advisor on educational matters. The public forums will be held in different regions of the State under the sponsorship of local educational opinion leaders, for example Board of Education members or Chamber of Commerce education groups. This sampling procedure accomplished two things. It allowed the LEAs to select participants who were active and visible in education and it encouraged the interest and commitment of those nominated to take part.

The group and individual interviews followed the same questions:

- What should a State testing program accomplish?
- What are some alternative strategies for a State testing program?

The order in which the groups were involved was also deliberate. The first group interview included teachers and central office staff because these persons had the most direct hands-on experience with State testing and could produce information that was relatively detailed and touched a variety of issues. Parents were interviewed next at two meetings held in different parts of the State. The discussion from these groups was then condensed into a single background report that was used in the individual interviews with State Board and SDE staff members. After these meetings, the parents were reconvened for a second set of interviews; by this time they were familiar with the topic and had discussed it with others in their communities. The discussion was then carried to a second group interview with the teachers and central office staff members in the form of alternative strategies for State testing developed by the earlier groups.

At the first group interview the teachers assembled a half-day before the central office staff in order to receive a briefing on the existing State testing program. This turned out to be as important as expected; teachers had a great deal of knowledge about the program from their classroom perspective but were relatively unfamiliar with the other related programs. Parents were also given a training session prior to their discussion. This accomplished several things. The questions they asked about the current testing program were the same they used in discussing what an alternative program should accomplish and look like, and the training helped the parents (from their reports) in going back to their school systems and asking teachers and other parents what they thought a State testing program should do.

Following each group interview and the cluster of individual interviews the Bureau of Evaluation prepared reports of the discussions. These were circulated to the interview participants with instructions to note anything that was not accurate or that they wanted to change or add. The corrected draft report was then presented to the subsequent group. In that way the study's content was iterative, and was able to build as a single study rather than as a series of unconnected reports.

Outcomes

The major outcome of the study has been a positive one: it has provided information over a period of time to the State Superintendent and the State Board of Education about a sensitive issue in such a way that both have been able to make informed judgments that reflect the data they received. The suggestions of the interviewees about purposes and strategies for State testing were also of a high quality, leading to

recommendations from the SDE that the evaluators and the SDE testing program staff felt were considerably more creative and more aware of related programs and issues then would have been possible if only the SDE staffs had been involved.

The study confirmed some of the earlier assumptions about how the process would work, and disconfirmed others. The process of incrementally involving different groups did establish communication lines and set the stage for public forums on this and other issues. However, the content of the study findings was unexpectedly useful. There was, contrary to expectations, little conflict among groups. They were almost unanimous in identifying the same major purposes for a State testing program and when they disagreed about a potential testing strategy it was possible to negotiate a compromise that met the disparate sets of needs. Parents, for example, wanted information about how their children were doing on skills beyond the minimums; LEA staff felt this should not be a requirement for student promotion, and both groups were happy in suggesting a strategy that would give normative data on higher-level skills but not count them as a promotion requirement.

Pre-interview training did turn out to be important. Parents and teachers required a grounding in the existing testing program and related programs, and they were quick and enthusiastic learners. Some bystanders -- superintendents who were called to nominate participants, central office staff members who drove parents to the meetings -- asked to be included in the study and were allowed to participate in subsequent interviews.

There are only two caveats to those considering the use of this technique. The first is that the suggestions made by the interview participants must be "digested" by technical staff if they are to be useful. Parents, teachers, and central office supervisors can develop creative and detailed suggestions but these must be reflected upon by those who are familiar with the total mechanics of the topic and who have more leisure than a one-day interview to play "what if" with all of the potential ramifications.

The second warning is that this is an extremely labor-intensive procedure. Setting up each group interview took about four person-days of work, and the follow up in processing travel vouchers and the like required another two days. The group interviews themselves used four evaluators each, for something like 20 working days. The individual interviews probably required an additional week of staff time. And, the reports had to be written (very thoughtfully) and distributed. At this point the study has used almost five full months of staff time from the Bureau of Evaluation, without considering the involvement of persons from other SDE Bureaus or the interview participants.

Overall, however, it is felt to be a fruitful use of staff. The procedure provided useful information in a manner that encouraged the trust of both those providing and those using the results. In the long run it is expected that the study will be very helpful in allowing the State to make some major educational changes in a rational and nondisruptive manner.